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ABSTRACT

Latinas' educational experiences are affected by the interaction of many factors, including poverty, racism, sexual harassment, and lack of English language proficiency. With guidance from educators, Latina adolescents can make fulfilling educational choices. This digest presents a range of strategies that schools can employ to promote Latinas' academic achievement. Schools must communicate that Hispanic culture is valued and integrate it into programs and services that help ameliorate differences between school and home. Schools also must individually tailor support for Latinas and their families to accommodate their diverse needs and perspectives. School staff must communicate that all students are expected to graduate and to succeed academically, helping Latinas understand that they can value familial interdependence without subverting personal goals. Schools can facilitate Latinas' learning and increase their engagement in the school community by providing educational services needed to ensure their educational preparedness and by developing a fully multicultural curriculum. It is important for schools to: create an environment where students believe that their requests for help will be positively received; help Latinas access community health services; and facilitate parent involvement in order to increase their commitment to their children's education. (SM)

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STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF LATINAS

The educational experiences of Latinas are challenged by the high rate of poverty in their communities, the learning problems caused by a lack of English language proficiency, racism, and sexual harassment (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Despite such obstacles, many Latinas persist and achieve in school, and the number of Latinas in college has been steadily increasing, although their rate is still much lower than that of their white counterparts. Some Latinas return to school to pursue a higher education in adulthood after their children require less supervision or at their employers' urging (S. Saez, Educational Testing Service, personal communication, September 2001). Others of high school or college age may have great difficulty in reconciling their belief in the necessity of getting an effective education with the tenet in the Hispanic community that they put family obligations first. As a consequence, some Latina adolescents may drop out of school and engage in other self-defeating behaviors, like getting pregnant, that affect their futures even more adversely. However Latinas manage the stresses in their lives, the result is that they lag behind other ethnic groups on most academic and economic measures of success, and suffer disproportionally from emotional disorders (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; *The State of Hispanic Girls*, 1999).

With guidance from educators, though, all Latina adolescents can make self-fulfilling choices. There are dozens of in-school and after-school programs, many involving their families, that are working successfully with Latinas (see Slavin & Calderón, 2001, and White House Initiative, 2000, for descriptions of such programs). But it is also important that the school generally is sensitive to Hispanic culture, accounts for the wide-ranging constraints of poverty, and meets the learning and developmental needs of Latinas to promote their academic achievement. This digest presents a range of strategies that schools serving Latinas can employ. The strategies will likely be most relevant for Latinas whose families have been in the U.S. for only a few generations, are poor, less fluent in English, and more culturally isolated, although all Latinas can benefit from them.

Unique Challenges for Latina Students

Some of the challenges facing Latinas in their efforts to achieve are common to all students from poor and/or immigrant backgrounds. Their families may lack the communication skills, knowledge, and experience to take advantage of educational, cultural, and social opportunities; and they may not have been able to foster development of school readiness skills. Equally important, the short-term economic needs of the family may supersede the desires of parents to support their children's long-term education goals (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

Additional challenges to Latinas' education outcomes ironically relate more directly to their strong and rich Hispanic culture. The belief that the welfare of the family (and community) supersedes individual aspirations is fairly fixed in the various Hispanic communities. It can cause adolescents to drop out in order to bring another much needed paycheck into the household. It might also dampen Latinas' efforts to succeed in the classroom if achievement requires competition rather than cooperation with other students. Further, Latina adolescents often assume adult roles in their homes; their families expect them to do housework and take care of their elders and siblings, and, if needed, to serve as interpreters and intermediaries when contact with the outside world must be made (i.e., at medical appointments, job interviews, social service agency meetings). Premature adulthood can lead Latinas to feel ready for marriage and motherhood before completing their education (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1992; Weiler, 2000).

Finally, Latinas are least likely among population groups to take advantage of physical and mental health care services. Despite the turmoil that may plague their lives, poverty, a lack of local Spanish-speaking providers and a cultural bias against asking outsiders for help conspire to prevent them from seeking services (*The State of Hispanic Girls*, 1999).

Special School Supports

In general, schools need to communicate that Hispanic culture is valued and to integrate it into programs and services that help ameliorate the differences between school and home. Schools also need to individually tailor the supports they offer Latinas and their families to accommodate their diverse needs and perspectives (Weiler, 2000).

School Expectations for Latinas

School staff members need to convey the message that all students are expected to graduate and to succeed academically. More specifically, they can help Latinas understand how it is possible to value familial interdependence without subverting personal goals because individual achievement not only reflects well on their community but can be materially beneficial to others as well.

Educators can work with Latinas to integrate the possibly contradictory demands of their community with their personal desires for the future. If they understand that some Latinas want to have large families, and place particular value on a traditional female social role, they can better help them set goals and make a practical life plan that includes first pursuing a higher education and then building a family. School staff especially need to help these students prepare for an educational future without the interference of their own bias and advanced education; some students should be prepared for higher and advanced education, but all of them should be helped to complete high school and to appreciate the value of some form of postsecondary and higher education, even if attending college needs to be delayed (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Kitano, 1998; Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1992).

Schools can help Latinas develop the contacts and access the community resources which will increase their opportunities for future fulfillment and are readily available to their more advantaged peers. They can introduce students to Latina role models who demonstrate the transcendent value of an educa-

tion and represent a range of viable careers. And they can invite recruiters who will discuss their colleges' benefits for Latinas, such as culturally-sensitive programs and educational supports and financial aid packages (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

Educational Strategies

Schools can facilitate Latinas' learning and increase their feelings of attachment to the school community by providing the educational services needed to ensure their educational preparedness and by developing a fully multicultural curriculum. The presence of Latino staff members can increase the students' comfort level through an innate understanding of their lives. Schools can accommodate Latinas' inclination toward cooperative learning and encourage them to create study groups to enhance learning, combat feelings of isolation, and be a place for sharing feelings about cultural dissonance (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Weiler, 2000; White House Initiative, 2000).

To help Latinas broaden their choices, schools should evaluate them for special talents and place them in classes that prepare them for higher education and teach higher order job skills, whatever their degree of English fluency. But, ultimately, schools must ensure that students master the English language as they also acknowledge the value of Spanish language proficiency (Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1992).

Provision of Ancillary Services

Schools need to create an environment where students believe that their requests for help to support their persistence will receive a positive response. For example, schools can accommodate the needs of students who must be absent for family-related reasons (i.e., care for siblings, translation services for adults). Even better, they might work with families to find a community resource to draw upon instead of their daughters. Using the Spanish language can facilitate staff communication with students and their families whose English is limited and help staff provide necessary services.

Schools can help Latinas access community health services. While a sex education curriculum (especially if it covers contraception) can be controversial, teaching "refusal skills" can help adolescents withstand the social pressure to become sexually active. Latinas in particular may benefit from a school or community source for information, given Hispanic cultural or religious reticence to deal with the topic. Couching a discussion on sexuality in a curriculum on general women's health can be a way to cover the subject while still respecting community values. Providing pregnant students with on-site medical care and parenting classes can increase their school persistence, as can providing day care for students with children (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; *The State of Hispanic Girls*; 1999; Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1992; White House Initiative, 2000).

Parent Involvement

Schools need to appreciate that while Latino families want their daughters to have a good education, many have immediate problems to solve that may supersede that desire, personal histories of being failed by U.S. institutions, and a tradition of preparing males and females for very different roles. Educators can explore with parents the idea that making an investment in their children's education—not only a financial contribution, but time for regular school attendance and homework—may be extremely worthwhile for both their sons and daughters (Kitano, 1998). Recommending that parents talk with their daughters about sex and family planning might be even more contentious, but family support for postponing motherhood might encourage Latinas to complete school first (Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1992).

Schools can provide families with useful benefits: English language instruction and other on-site services for adults, such as job counseling (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Helping families acquire the assistance they are entitled to (i.e., food stamps, health insurance) can help keep their children in school since the need for an additional income often forces families to withdraw their children from school as soon as they are old enough to work. In fact, referrals to culturally sensitive and bilingual community services of all types can increase the probability that families will use them to support their efforts to keep their children in school (White House Initiative, 2000).

Involving parents in the school is a particularly good way to increase their commitment to their children's education. Inviting them to functions, asking for their input on curriculum and activities, and suggesting specific ways that they can promote their children's learning and avail themselves of free educational resources in the community, can benefit the school as well as the family. Providing information about community colleges—which are close to home, have flexible schedules, and relatively affordable fees—can encourage families to consider the viability of a higher education for their children (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

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